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The Closer East: The Epic of Gilgamesh and Homer

Abstract: A number of similarities between the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh and the Homeric poems have been recognized by scholars for some time. The present paper attempts to bring these together, even as the author singles out three distinct patterns that find cross-textual parallels. Firstly, the discussion centres on the development of the three main heroes – Gilgamesh, Achilles and Odysseus – whose portrayals appear to convey an ideology of humanism and a newfound interest in the human condition. Secondly, certain correspondences between some of the background characters, including divinities, are expounded on. Finally, examples are given of fragments that seem to be copied from their Near Eastern originals into the Greek epics. Through such analysis, the author hopes to establish a solid link between the literatures of ancient Near East and Greece, emphasizing the significance of this acknowledgement for both the reading of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, as well as the more general discourse of cultural exchange in the eastern Mediterranean in early antiquity.

Key words: Homer, the *Odyssey*, the *Iliad*, Gilgamesh, Near East, ancient humanism

The influence of the Near East on Greek culture, from c. 800 BC onwards, is nowadays rarely disputed. The evidence is especially abundant in art and architecture, in terms of adoption of both technical skills and foreign motifs, and it is also possible to identify major single phenomena, such as the acquisition, and subsequent rendering, by the Greeks of the Semitic alphabet; accordingly, these areas of intercultural exchange have been treated, over the past two hundred years or so, with due academic attention and yielded an extensive literature of the subject. Corresponding, comparative and historical, studies of the impact of the East on early Greek literature, often aided by recourse to mythology, are rarer. Of the

more important, it is perhaps worth to mention Walter Burkert's work on the Orientalizing Revolution which devotes a chapter to literature and makes compelling argument concerning the free flow of ideas, ideological as well as technological, in the Eastern Mediterranean in the period in question.¹ Sarah Morris' book on Daidalos may well be considered revisionist, but her claim of the profound influence of the East on the genesis of the Greek culture, including poetry and drama, is remarkably nuanced and, even though it lacks the radicalism of *Black Athena* by Martin Bernal, has contributed hugely to the discourse.² Martin West's exhaustive study of the Asiatic influences present in Greek thought and writing remains so far the seminal study of the subject.³ A number of Hellenists and Near Eastern scholars have also acknowledged the certain similarities between the Near Eastern epic, especially the preserved stories of Gilgamesh, and Homer, and consequently a few articles on the subject have been published.⁴

This paper attempts to present, and in some cases expound on, the theses posited in the above works in order to provide a cohesive comparison of the Epic of Gilgamesh and the Homeric epics. I will argue that there is a number of kinds of

¹ W. Burkert: *The Orientalizing Revolution. Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age*. Cambridge, Mass.–London 1992, pp. 88–127.

² S.P. Morris: *Daidalos and the Origins of Greek Art*. Princeton 1992; cf. M. Bernal: *Black Athena. The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*. Vols. 1–3. London, 1987, 1991, 2006. Upon publication, Bernal's study caused something of a scandal in the classicist community and attracted responses verging on vehement, but ultimately failed to sway the consensus towards agreement with the author's extreme theses; cf. R.L. Ponder: "Black Athena 2: History Without Rules." *The American Historical Review* 1992, vol. 97, no. 2, pp. 461–464; *Black Athena Revisited*. Eds. M.R. Lefkowitz, G.M. Rogers. Chapel Hill 1996; M.R. Lefkowitz: *Not Out of Africa. How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History*. New York 1997; M. Bernal, D.C. Moore: *Black Athena Writes Back. Martin Bernal Responds to His Critics*. Durham 2001; W. Slack: *White Athena. The Afrocentrist Theft of Greek Civilization*. Bloomington 2006.

³ M.L. West: *The East Face of Helicon. West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth*. Oxford 1997.

⁴ The earlier papers include: G. Gresseth: "The Gilgamesh Epic and Homer." *The Classical Journal* 1975, vol. 70, no. 4, pp. 1–18; and H.N. Wolff: "Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Heroic Life." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 1969, vol. 89, no. 2, pp. 392–398. For more recent literary approaches, see: T. Abusch: "The Epic of Gilgamesh and the Homeric Epics." In: *Mythology and Mythologies. Methodological Approaches to Intercultural Influences. Proceedings of the Second Annual Symposium of the Assyrian and Babylonian Intellectual Heritage Project, Held in Paris, France, October 4–7 1999*. Ed. R.M. Whiting. Helsinki 2001, pp. 1–6; W. Burkert: "Near Eastern Connections." In: *A Companion to Ancient Epic*. Ed. J.M. Foley. Malden 2005, pp. 291–301; S.P. Morris: "Homer and the Near East." In: *A New Companion to Homer*. Eds. I. Morris, B. Powell. Leiden 1997, pp. 599–623. For the possibility of historical placing of the Homeric phenomenon within the frame of Near Eastern culture, see: L.H. Feldman: "Homer and the Near East: The Rise of the Greek Genius." *The Biblical Archaeologist* 1996, vol. 59, no. 1, pp. 13–21; M.L. West: "The Invention of Homer." *The Classical Quarterly* 1999, vol. 49, no. 2, pp. 364–382. A recent commentary on the *Iliad* also makes a case for searching for some Near Eastern elements in the epic: S. Pulleyn: "The *Iliad* and the Orient." In: Idem: *Homer. Iliad, Book One*. Oxford, pp. 11–15.

similarities to be found in the two literary traditions; since the route of transmission almost certainly led westward from Asia Minor and the Levant, these similarities should in fact be taken as borrowings from the Eastern literature by the authors of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, even though the inspiration and its journey in space and time cannot be traced or reconstructed historically.⁵ Such comparisons and analyses shall, one might hope, become more standard even as the various fields of Near Eastern studies, as well as archaeology and comparative linguistics and mythology, continue to thrive and are expected to yield yet more results and discoveries – the Asiatic influence on Hesiod's *Theogony*, for example, was recognized once a number of Hittite and Old Babylonian texts had been deciphered early in the 20th century.⁶ As the Hellenist net is being cast further still to encompass and consider the more distant cultures, such renewed interest is important as it may very well enhance the understanding of the Greek world in a previously unexplored dimension and help to place it firmly within the broad context of the Eastern Mediterranean culture of early antiquity.

The choice of the Epic of Gilgamesh as the point of reference here is due not only to the relative familiarity of Western scholars with it and the fairly advanced study of it (surpassed, roughly for the period discussed, only by the Old Testament), but also to the epic's cross-cultural significance and prevalence in Near Eastern antiquity. The first written stories about Gilgamesh of Uruk (c. 2700 BC), in Sumerian, appear in Babylonia at the end of the third millennium BC; the epic as we know it today was composed in Akkadian for the first time some time later, in c. 1700 BC. The so-called Standard Version dates to c. 1300–1100 BC and was found in the library of the

⁵ Given the antiquity and popularity of the Gilgamesh epic, there is no reason not to allow the possibility that the stories about the Sumerian king reached Greece, perhaps through Crete, as early as the late Bronze Age; for the later period of intensified communication, between the 9th and 7th centuries BC, one might think of the international hubs of exchange, such as Al Mina or the Aeolian and Ionian ports of western Asia Minor. For the possible routes of transmission of the epic, see: S.P. Morris: "Homer and the Near East...", pp. 606–616; M.L. West: *The East Face of Helicon...*, pp. 586ff. More generally on the sites favoured by scholars as points of entry of Eastern ideas into the Greek world, see: J. Boardman: *The Greeks Overseas. Their Early Colonies and Trade*. London 1980 (pp. 46–56 for the Syro-Phoenician coast); W. Burkert: *The Orientalizing Revolution...*, pp. 9–14; M.L. West: *The East Face of Helicon...*, pp. 2–4.

⁶ The Hesiodic scholarship in reference to the Near East is summarized by M.L. West: *The East Face of Helicon...*, pp. 276–333. In the case of the Hittites (and Hurro-Hittites), the resemblance of the texts mentioned here (*Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. Ed. J.B. Pritchard. Princeton 1950, pp. 120–125) to Hesiod's creation myth is striking and the Hittites are present throughout the works of both West (*The East Face of Helicon...*) and Morris (*Daidalos...*); see also: W. Burkert: "Near Eastern Connections...", pp. 295–296. There may also be a link, as of yet tantalizing at best, between the *Iliad* and some Hittite people: J. Puhvel: *Homer and Hittite*. Innsbruck 1991, argued that the "lost" Trojan language was in fact Luwian, an Anatolian dialect closely related to Hittite, and his proposition becomes all the more significant in light of the larger argument at hand: "Homer is too important to be left to single-track Hellenists" (p. 29); cf. W. Burkert: "Near Eastern Connections...", pp. 292–293.

Assyrian king Ashurbanipal (c. 668–627 BC) at Nineveh. In this form, the poem was still copied under the Achaemenids and later the Seleucids. Moreover, its fame seems to have spread well beyond Mesopotamia, as local variations, abridgements and translations are known from the Hittite centre in Hattusa (Asia Minor), Megiddo (Palestine), Ugarit (Phoenicia) and Emar (Syria).⁷ What emerges, therefore, from this brief survey, is that the story of Gilgamesh is truly representative of epic as ‘super-genre’, surpassing cultural boundaries and constantly readapting itself within the frameworks of recipient societies in order to reflect their values, artistic tastes and beliefs. That it stems from the rich mythological background of the Semitic Near East is best exemplified by the presence in the story of Uta-napishti,⁸ a survivor of the great flood that looms large in many roughly contemporary texts, most notably the Old Testament and the *Enûma Eliš*; it is significant that the Deluge is not central to the Gilgamesh epic, but rather its mythic historicity is taken for granted as an event firmly embedded in the tradition of this area. The remnants of the Homeric corpus, often presupposed rather than known, and dating from the early stage prior to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* being written down, suggest a similar poetic and mythological system operating among the Greek-speaking peoples, and very possibly originating in the most remote Indo-European past, as certain narrative correspondences may be found between the Hellenic epics and their Indian counterparts, *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*.⁹ That the two extensive epic traditions existed within relatively close proximity to each other is not surprising, and that they could interpenetrate, especially at times of intensified exchange, is certainly not beyond possibility.

Hērōs Descended: Gilgamesh, Achilles and Odysseus as Protoplasts of Humanism

Gilgamesh and Achilles

The very first, and the most obvious, similarity between the Epic of Gilgamesh and the Homeric poems rests in the relationships between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, and Achilles and Patroklos. A mere fact of friendship is insufficient to claim any significant correspondence; but both relationships display certain patterns that

⁷ After: A. George: Introduction to *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. London 1999, pp. xvi–xxx. Note the transitional nature of the epic, suggesting its attractiveness in antiquity: taken over from the Sumerians by the various Semitic groups, it was eventually appropriated also by the Indo-European Hittites and apparently appreciated by the Iranians and Hellenistic Greeks, too.

⁸ In this paper, I follow George’s translation of the Standard Version of the Gilgamesh epic in the spelling of Akkadian words and names; it is also the text used for all subsequent quotations from the epic. For the Greek names, I use the traditional Latinized forms for the most established characters and places, and a direct transliteration from Greek for the less common; hence “Achilles,” “Ithaca,” “Athena,” etc., but “Patroklos” rather than “Patroclus,” and so on.

⁹ See J.T. Katz: “The Indo-European Context.” In: *A Companion to Ancient Epic*..., pp. 20–30.

appear to underlie the stories of the heroes and their friends. Firstly, the men are not equals: the higher statuses of Gilgamesh and Achilles, in reference to their respective companions, are undisputed. Both protagonists not only descend from the higher strata of aristocracy – Achilles being a *basileus*, Gilgamesh a king – but they are also demigods, singled out and doomed within their narratives precisely because of the burdens of their divine origins. Secondly, the closeness between each pair is particularly strong, transcending the usual affections of heroic camaraderie; Patroklos is for Achilles what Enkidu is for Gilgamesh: “a friend whom he loved so dear” (*Gil.* X 55).¹⁰ Not coincidentally, the exceptional quality of these bonds is revealed with the full force of emotion and depth only at the deaths of both Enkidu and Patroklos. The two events are central to the stories, as they impact dramatically on the epic plotlines and effectively determine the fates of the main heroes.¹¹ Achilles, acutely aware of the dire consequences of his decision, nonetheless chooses not to return to Phthia and to remain instead at the Trojan gates to seek revenge; Gilgamesh, stricken with grief and terrified, sets out on a quest for immortality.

The morbid ends of Patroklos and Enkidu are significant also in another, although clearly related, respect: they mark a transition within the stories from the expression of purely heroic values to the more personal level of tragedy and loss. The deaths of the companions are here doubly important. Firstly, as has already been noted, they force the narratives into new and ultimate directions; but also, they stand as the metaphorical deaths of both Achilles and Gilgamesh. It is hugely significant that Patroklos and Enkidu die *in place* of their friends and *because of* their prior actions, nota bene in both cases verging on hubris and resulting from heroic pride and arrogance. Patroklos is slain by Hektor while actually *pretending* to be Achilles and wearing his friend’s magnificent armour; the ruse and the disguise are a consequence of the Greeks’ ill luck and desperation brought about by Achilles’ wrath and withdrawal from the battlefield. Enkidu, on the other hand, dies of a disease sent upon him by the gods at Ishtar’s request, who wished Gilgamesh’s demise too, but was refused; Enkidu, although a participant of the hero’s adventures that had originally set off the chain of events that led to the goddess’ anger, was in his death simply a replacement for Gilgamesh, the next best thing. The divine interventions in both the deaths (the first blow being meted out by Apollo in the case of Patroklos, the second by Euphorbos inspired and spurred on

¹⁰ Cf. *Il.* XVIII 80, where Achilles refers to Patroklos as φίλος . . . ἑταῖρος . . . τὸν ἐγὼ περὶ πάντων τῶν ἑταίρων ἴσον ἐμῇ κεφαλῇ (“a dear friend, whom I honoured above all other companions, equally to myself”). All quotations from the *Iliad* are taken from: *Homer. Homeri Opera*. Ed. D.B. Monro, T.W. Allen. Oxford 1917–1920. All translations of the Homeric epics are the author’s, unless otherwise stated.

¹¹ J.M. Sasson: “Some Literary Motifs in the Composition of the Gilgamesh Epic.” *Studies in Philology* 1972, vol. 69, no. 3. pp. 264–266; G. Gresseth: “The Gilgamesh Epic and Homer...,” pp. 15–16; M.L. West: *The East Face of Helicon...*, pp. 336–338.

by the god), characterized by an element of barter and the gods' wickedness, expose fully the complex and tormented nature of the relationship between the anointed heroes and the divinities. By that, and combined with a sense of guilt on the part of the main heroes, they also herald the breakdown of the traditional demeanour of the *hērōs* and his descent towards humanity. Because the ultimate fates of Enkidu and Patroklos are metaphors for the deaths of Gilgamesh and Achilles, through these events the heroes both experience and anticipate their own ends. "I shall die, and shall I not then be as Enkidu? Sorrow has entered my heart!" says Gilgamesh, "[After Enkidu's death] I was afraid that I would too die. . . Shall I not be like him, and also lie down, never to rise again, through all eternity?" (IX 3–4, X 61, 70–71). Confronted for the first time by the full vividness and horror of death, he is overcome by the terrible realization of his own mortality; "he loses all his unthinking self-satisfaction and becomes a raging, questioning Achilles."¹² Even as Gilgamesh resolves upon finding a source of immortality, Achilles chooses the path of revenge despite the knowledge that his demise will follow soon after Hektor's. But he, too, shares in the sudden and bitter apprehension of his own vulnerability to death, as he confides with Thetis: νῦν δ' ἵνα καὶ σοὶ πένθος ἐνὶ φρεσὶ μυρίον εἴη παιδὸς ἀποφθιμένοιο, τὸν οὐχ ὑποδέξεαι αὐτίς οἴκαδε νοστήσαντ' (XVIII 88–90: "now you too may yet grieve immensely in your heart for a perished son, whom never again shall you welcome as he returns home"); κῆρα δ' ἐγὼ τότε δέξομαι ὅπποτε κεν δὴ Ζεὺς ἐθέλῃ τελέσαι ἢ δ' ἀθάνατοι θεοὶ ἄλλοι (XVII 115–116: "I shall accept my doom then, whenever Zeus and the other immortal gods may wish it to come to pass"). Moreover, the death that Achilles and Gilgamesh face is palpable and corporeal, undignified as it exposes the un pitying decay of human flesh. Gilgamesh admits that he did not "surrender [Enkidu's] body for burial until a maggot dropped from his nostril" (X 59–60), and that this was the sight that sent him on his quest. Achilles is spared a similar atrocity, but he is nonetheless concerned with precisely the same matters: μάλ' αἰνῶς δεῖδω μή μοι . . . Μενoitίου ἄλκιμον υἱὸν μυῖαι καδδῶσαι κατὰ χαλκοτύπους ὡτειλᾶς εὐλᾶς ἐγγείωνται, ἀεικίσσωσι δὲ νεκρόν . . . κατὰ δὲ χροᾶ πάντα σαπῆν (XIX 23–27: "dreadfully I fear, now that his life has ended, lest flies settle down on the brave son of Menoitios and breed maggots in the wounds inflicted with bronze, thus spoiling the corpse . . . and that his skin rots away").

Therefore, the profound experience of grief – its pain, terror and the premonition that it brings – effectively humanizes both Achilles and Gilgamesh, as they are forced into the self-realization of being mortal. This is also the point at which the epic tears itself away from the myth, since the poems are secularized by the new, wholly human, concerns and sorrows. Even as the psychological and ideological transition occurs, the image of a shamanistic, godlike, indestructible hero is shattered; the man within, denied the shelter of divine integrity, is exposed and becomes the main

¹² H.N. Wolff: "Gilgamesh, Enkidu...", p. 392.

object of attention and self-absorption. Both heroes suffer, rage and question, and seek relief from pain in their own different ways – Gilgamesh in an attempt to defy the laws of mortality, Achilles in a bloody and vehement revenge that will set off his own death – but, perhaps not incidentally, the closure (to use a modern term) comes only with the acceptance of the transience of life. Reconciling with Priam, Achilles says: ἄλγεα δ' ἔμπης ἐν θυμῷ κατακεῖσθαι ἐάσομεν ἀχνόμενοι περ: οὐ γάρ τις πρῆξις πέλεται κρυεροῖο γόοιο: ὥς γὰρ ἐπεκλώσαντο θεοὶ δειλοῖσι βροτοῖσι ζῶειν ἀχνυμένοις: αὐτοὶ δέ τ' ἀκηδέες εἰσὶ (XXIV 522–526: “let our pains rest in our hearts, though both we grieve, for no good comes from bitter crying; thus had the gods arranged, that wretched mortals shall live in sorrow, while they themselves have no such care”). Gilgamesh is markedly less elaborate, but having lost the life-giving “Plant of Heartbeat” and upon his return to Uruk, he simply marvels at the beauty and magnificence of his city; as this final fragment repeats word for word the opening sections of the epic, it suggests that the king is truly “back home,” appreciating again the life he had led before. This new-found peace finally breaks the spiral of internal torment and in both narratives provides a befitting conclusion to the stories that seem to have captured the momentous shift of interest, when the hero embraced his empathic humanity, and the epic, freed from the allegory and theism of myth, acquired a novel multifaceted dimension.¹³

Gilgamesh and Odysseus

Achilles dies. Gilgamesh does not. The heroes were transformed by their grief, but the lessons learnt were different, and consequently they met wholly different ends. Tzvi Abusch suggests that at the point of Gilgamesh's final departure from Uruk, when the king begins his “wanderings in the wild,” the attention of the comparer turns to the *Odyssey*.¹⁴ The parallels here are abundant, too; Odysseus is no Achilles, nor really a Gilgamesh, as he is shrewd and cunning, and always eager to avoid

¹³ One scholar, having pointed out the overriding concern with human condition in the story of Gilgamesh, went on to proclaim the epic “a document of ancient humanism” (W.L. Moran: “The Epic of Gilgamesh.” *Bulletin. Canadian Society for Mesopotamian Studies* 1991, no. 22, pp. 15–22). Tzvi Abusch (“The Epic of Gilgamesh...,” pp. 1–3) draws attention to the tragedy resulting from the conflict between the heroic and the human explicit in Akkadian and Greek epics, although he argues that Homer is “more pessimistic” since his heroes meet ends that are either miserable (Achilles) or uncertain (Odysseus); it is certainly true that the Gilgamesh epic concludes with something more of a happy ending. For more on humanism in Gilgamesh, see: H.N. Wolff: “Gilgamesh, Enkidu...,” p. 392; J.M. Sasson: “Some Literary Motifs...,” pp. 268–270. For the comparisons in this respect of Gilgamesh and Homer, see: G. Gresseth: “The Gilgamesh Epic and Homer...,” pp. 12–18; S.P. Morris: “Homer and the Near East...,” p. 601; M.L. West: *The East Face of Helicon*..., pp. 340–343. Cf. also A.B. Lord: *The Singer of Tales*. Eds. S. Mitchell, G. Nagy. Cambridge, Mass.–London 2000, pp. 201–202; W. Burkert: *The Orientalizing Revolution*..., pp. 117–118. For a concise summary of the myth/epic discourse, see: A. George: Introduction..., pp. xxxii–xxxiv in relation to Gilgamesh, or else refer to L. Edmunds: “Epic and Myth.” In: *A Companion to Ancient Epic*..., pp. 31–44.

¹⁴ T. Abusch: “The Epic of Gilgamesh...,” p. 3.

danger, but, as Martin West rightly points out, in the course of his homecoming voyage he often finds himself in very “Gilgamesh-like” situations.¹⁵ The significance of journey is twofold in both epics, and again the two poems exploit this theme along parallel patterns. Firstly, there is the element of “heroic humanism,” which may be applied here also, albeit in a context different to that shared by the Mesopotamian story and the *Iliad*. Importantly, both the king of Uruk and the king of Ithaca are lone travellers to distant and strange lands, and both return to their homes deprived of their primary goals – Odysseus without the spoils of the Trojan War, Gilgamesh without the plant of immortality – but the gains they both obtain along the way are immaterial and nonetheless substantial. A modern poet has encapsulated well the nature of the wealth thus won:

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.
 Arriving there is what you are destined for.
 But do not hurry the journey at all.
 Better if it lasts for years,
 so you are old by the time you reach the island,
 wealthy with all you have gained on the way . . .
 Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
 you will have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.¹⁶

Wisdom and experience: these are not necessarily the essential components of the hero's *aretē*. These qualities, especially as they overlap and the first comes with the latter, are entirely human, gained rather than given or bestowed upon man by the virtue of his divine origin. The hardships and disappointments of the journeys related in the *Odyssey* and the Gilgamesh epic seem in both poems to accumulate in order to finally convey a sort of *carpe diem* ideology, which abandons the drama of myth in favour of an introspective contemplation of the human condition. A striking similarity between two passages in the two epics has often been pointed out;¹⁷ the first one is a speech delivered to the mourning Gilgamesh by the tavern-keeper Shiduri (Si III 2–14):

O Gilgamesh, where are you wandering?
 The life that you seek you never will find:
 when the gods created mankind,
 death they dispensed to mankind,
 life they kept for themselves.

¹⁵ M. West: *The East Face of Helicon...*, p. 402. Note also the compelling argument which seeks the genesis of the Odysseus character in the folklore figure of *trickster*, found in mythologies worldwide; see especially: L. Edmunds: “Epic and Myth...,” pp. 37–39.

¹⁶ C.P. Cavafy: “Ithaka.” In: *Collected Poems*. Trans. E. Keeley, P. Sherrard. Ed. G. Savidis. Princeton 1992, pp. 36–37.

¹⁷ For the fullest analysis, see: M.L. West: *The East Face of Helicon...*, pp. 409–410.

But you, Gilgamesh, let your belly be full,
 enjoy yourself always by day and by night!
 Make merry each day,
 dance and play day and night!

Let your clothes be clean,
 let your head be washed, may you bathe in water!
 Gaze on the child who holds your hand,
 let your wife enjoy your repeated embrace!
 For such is the destiny [*of mortal men*] . . .¹⁸

The corresponding fragment of the *Odyssey* is a list, provided by Alkinoös, of the activities favoured by the Phaiakians. The pursuits are almost identical to those recommended by Shiduri, and it is important to remember that the inhabitants of Scheria are in the Homeric universe a blessed race that embodies good life; it follows, therefore, that what they consider desirable is also ideal: αἰεὶ δ' ἡμῖν δαῖς τε φίλη κίθαρις τε χοροὶ τε εἵματα τ' ἐξημοιβὰ λοετρά τε θερμὰ καὶ εὐναί (VIII 248–249: “always is a feast dear to us, and the play of the lyre, and dancing, changes of robes, warm baths and our beds”).¹⁹ Gilgamesh’s return to Uruk has in this light the same meaning as the conclusion of Odysseus’ *nostos*, even though the Greek hero, unlike his Near Eastern counterpart, has strived for home from the start; nevertheless, the “moral” of the Gilgamesh epic is the same, emphasizing the limitations of mortals and the futility of aspirations beyond their reach. What effectively happens here, then, is a total breakdown of the heroic identity as a way of life, substituted by a contended family life: true happiness and satisfaction are to be found at home and in the fulfilment of one’s social and domestic obligations.²⁰

¹⁸ This fragment is not a part of the considerably later Standard Version from Nineveh, but comes instead from a tablet found in Sippar (Babylonia) and dates most probably to c. 1700 BC; after: A. George: *The Epic of Gilgamesh...*, p. 122. Cf. T. Abusch: “The Epic of Gilgamesh...,” p. 4. Compare also Shiduri’s comment on the gods in relation to mankind with Achilles’ words already quoted above (*Il.* XXIV 522–526).

¹⁹ εὐνή, in its most basic meaning, indeed stands for “bed”; in some cases, however, it denotes “marriage-bed” more specifically and so has an erotic connotation: cf. *Il.* III 445: ἐμίγην φιλότῃ καὶ εὐνῇ (lit. “I had an intercourse [with you] in love and in bed”); *Il.* IX 133: εὐνῆς ἐπιβήμεναι (“to go to bed,” followed by μιγῆναι, “to have intercourse”); *Il.* XVIII 433–434: ἔτλην ἀνέρος εὐνήν . . . οὐκ ἐθέλουσα (“I endured a man’s bed . . . unwillingly”); *Od.* X 297: ἀπανήνασθαι θεοῦ εὐνήν (“to reject [a] goddess’ bed,” i.e. “to refuse to have sex with her”); etc. After: H.G. Liddell, R. Scott: *A Greek-English Lexicon*. Ed. H.S. Jones, R. McKenzie. Oxford 1940, s.v. εὐνή.

²⁰ J.M. Sasson: “Some Literary Motifs...,” pp. 271–273; G. Gresseth: “The Gilgamesh Epic and Homer...,” pp. 2–4, 12–14; S.P. Morris: “Homer and the Near East...,” pp. 620–621; M.L. West: *East Face of Helicon...*, pp. 402–404.

This last statement may also be linked to another theme found both in the Epic of Gilgamesh and the *Odyssey*, namely that of the maturation of a king, who through the experience of his journey resumes the full responsibility of his regal position. This is true of Gilgamesh, as well as Odysseus: the wisdom they acquire comes from the lessons of self-control and resisting temptations; but more importantly still, once again the attributes of a hero are replaced by the qualities required of a leader of men, in a strictly political sense. Gilgamesh's youthful shenanigans and arrogance brought ruin to Uruk, while his unquenchable thirst for adventure and glory effectively caused Enkidu's death and his own troubles that followed; the quest for the plant of immortality was the final burst of passion before the king could take up again the rule of his city. Odysseus seems in this respect to have been somewhat less problematic and the social disruption in Ithaca resulted from his absence only; but even the fact that the peace and concord were restored on the island once its true king had returned suggests that his presence as a wise and judicious ruler was imperative for the restoration. It has been argued, however, that the socio-political dimension of both poems was a later addition, inserted in the epics as the cultures that produced them matured;²¹ if this claim is true – and the arguments here are compelling – it is once again the human, or humanistic, facet that comes to the forefront as underlying both texts.

Friends and Foes: Gods and Other Supplementary Characters

The Divine Relationships

The three poems emerge as texts of chiefly human interest, and their main characters represent the epic (in the many meanings of the term) transition from a semi-divine or divinely marked hero to a man conscious of and responsive to his profoundly human sorrows and duties, which result from his mortality and his place in the society of men. The conflict between the hero and the gods is demythicized: on some level, the man remains inferior and subject to the gods' will, but on the other hand, through his internal anguish and ultimately his choices, he gains self-awareness, maturity and wisdom; because of that, he is freed from the mythic circle of divine inspiration and scholasticism. The characters of Achilles, Odysseus and Gilgamesh are special in two ways: to some extent, they are universal, their stories a testament to the awakening of some form of "ancient humanism" to be discerned in the literature that they are parts of; but also, their torments, achievements and decisions are deeply intimate and individual, ingrained in and indispensable to the development of their characters.

²¹ T. Abusch: "The Epic of Gilgamesh...", p. 3; see also: A. George: Introduction..., pp. xxxv–xxvi.

In this light, the treatment of the divine in the epics is also what distinguishes the genre clearly from myth; in the former, gods are represented mainly in relation to the hero. In the simplest terms, their function is to help drive the narratives towards the conclusions intended for their human protagonists, but also to provide a bold contrast between the mortal and the divine conditions. There are certain parallels to be found in these human-divine relationships in all three narratives. Firstly, there is the theme of an epic triangle, i.e. the presence in the texts of a trinity of gods who dominate in the heavenly spheres of their poems by interaction, positive or negative, direct or not, with the hero.²² The first deity in such model is the sky god and a judge (Anu/Zeus), who supports the hero, but does not intervene personally. The second one is a mentor, who appears to the hero physically, supports him in his perils and may also plead his favourite's case to the judge-god (Shamash/Athena). Finally, there is the inevitable antagonist god (Ishtar/Apollo/Poseidon). This outline, of course, is a framework which, although set strongly in the epics, nonetheless allows for some diversions or indeed distortions. The antagonist gods are case in point here. Ishtar's wrath in the Gilgamesh epic and Poseidon's anger in the *Odyssey* are both result of the heroes' displays of disrespect: Gilgamesh, in a flash of reason prior to the wisdom he will acquire later, refuses to submit to the goddess' affections, knowing her deadly track record of previous relationships with mortals; Enkidu adds to the offence when, after killing the Bull of Heaven, he hurls a chunk of it at Ishtar and shouts: "Had I caught you too, I'd have treated you likewise, I'd have draped your arms in your guts!" (VI 156–157); Odysseus not only deceives and blinds Polyphemos, but in his exchange with the Kyklops also manages to insult Poseidon: αἶ γὰρ δὴ ψυχῆς τε καὶ αἰῶνός σε δυνάμην εὖνιν ποιήσας πέμψαι δόμον Ἄϊδος εἶσω, ὥς οὐκ ὀφθαλμόν γ' ἰήσεται οὐδ' ἐνοσίχθων (IX 523–525: "indeed, if only I were able, having rid you of your soul and life, to send you to the house of Hades, not even the Earth-shaker would heal your eye").

The *Iliad*, on the other hand, is more complex here. Hektor, Diomedes and Patroklos have their own triangles, and the crowd of divinities fluttering around Achilles is somewhat extended, as Hera and Poseidon also actively support him. More pointedly, however, the pattern of insult and divine wrath is disrupted, since Apollo's only reason to oppose Achilles is his mentorship of Hektor and the pre-existing knowledge of the fall of Troy – there is no clear blasphemy against Apollo in any of Achilles' words.²³ The reasons to be sought for the *Iliad*'s greater intricacy in this respect might tend towards the multiplicity of mythological and folk layers that had accumulated within the text over the supposed vast period

²² B. Louden: "The Gods in Epic, or Divine Economy." In: *A Companion to Ancient Epic*..., pp. 91–96.

²³ The closest he comes to one, it might be argued, is when he lamely threatens the god, fully aware of his own inadequacy: ἐμὲ . . . μέγα κῦδος ἀφείλεο . . . ἢ σ' ἄν τισαίμην, εἴ μοι δυνάμεις γε παρείη (XXII 18–20: "you took away my great glory . . . I would punish you, if I had the power").

of the epic's oral transmission; also, the *Iliad* as we know it, is merely a fragment that once belonged to a largely lost corpus of the earliest Hellenic literature. Notwithstanding the certain disparities, however, the very intimate, interactive relationships between the gods and the heroes in both Homeric poems may be regarded as strongly influenced by the Near Eastern model.²⁴

Mothers, Lovers and Wisemen

Certain similarities between some of the background characters of the three epics suggest that they could, possibly, be taken over from the Near Eastern tradition as stock figures, representative and imperative for the introduction of some fundamental themes; these proposed borrowings are abundant especially in the *Odyssey*. Firstly, there is the case of the immortal tavern-keeper Shiduri, whom Gilgamesh encounters in his travels, and the *Odyssey's* goddesses Kirke and Kalypso.²⁵ All three live in isolation and solitude (the nameless "maids" in Homer are here unimportant), and their primary function in the stories is to provide Gilgamesh and Odysseus with essential details on how their journeys should proceed. In general, their advice takes the heroes to the furthest points of their travels, where they meet wise men of the past generations, Uta-napishti, Teiresias and Alkinoös.

These three men, in their turn, seem to have something in common, too.²⁶ Their presence in the epics underlies the motif of a hero travelling through dangerous waters to visit a man, or a race, blessed by the gods in some way, to obtain what he desires. Uta-napishti was chosen as the sole survivor of the Flood and immortalized; Phaiakians are referred to as particularly favoured by the gods: αἰεὶ . . . θεοὶ φαίνονται ἐναργεῖς ἡμῖν . . . δαίνυνταί τε παρ' ἄμμι καθήμενοι ἔνθα περ ἡμεῖς . . . σφισιν ἐγγύθεν εἰμέν, ὥς περ Κύκλωπές τε καὶ ἄγρια φύλα Γιγάντων (VII 201–206: "always do the gods appear to us in their bodily shapes . . . and sitting among us, with us they feast . . . we are their close kin, just as the Kyklopes or the Gigantes' savage tribes"); Teiresias, perhaps the least fortunate of the three, is nonetheless singled out among the dead: τῷ καὶ τεθνηῶτι νόον πόρε Περσεφόνηα, οἷω πεπνύσθαι (X 494–495: "even in death did Persephone give him reason, he alone is wise [among the dead]"). Importantly,

²⁴ S.P. Morris: "Homer and the Near East...", pp. 616–618.

²⁵ For fuller discussion on the trio, see: S. Dalley: "Gilgamesh: Introduction." In: *Myths from Mesopotamia. Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh and Others*. Trans. S. Dalley. Oxford–New York 1989, pp. 47–49; M.L. West: *The East Face of Helicon...*, pp. 404–412; B. Louden: "The Gods in Epic...", pp. 91–93; H.P. Foley: "Women in Ancient Epic." In: *A Companion to Ancient Epic...*, pp. 105–118.

²⁶ Once again, at this point I refer the reader to more exhaustive studies, especially: Gresseth: "The Gilgamesh Epic and Homer...", pp. 5–11; and M.L. West: *The East Face of Helicon...*, pp. 412–415. See also: L.H. Feldman: "Homer and the Near East...", p. 20; S.P. Morris: "Homer and the Near East...", p. 621.

all three assist the heroes in their purposes – Uta-napishti tells Gilgamesh about the plant of rejuvenation; Teiresias expounds to Odysseus exactly how his *nostos* shall continue, while Alkinoös provides him with a ship to carry him to Ithaca.

The six characters referred to above, however briefly, seem linked to one another in yet another significant way. Abusch argues for a tentative parallel in the literary development of the Gilgamesh epic and the *Odyssey*. He observes that, in the case of Gilgamesh, three episodes were inserted at a later date: Tablet VI, which recollects the hero's rejection of Ishtar and the subsequent killing of the Bull of Heaven; the ending of Tablet XI, which had originally concluded with Shiduri and her famous speech (see above), and to which the story of Uta-napishti was later added; and Tablet XII, which follows Enkidu's descent into the Netherworld and describes the conditions there.²⁷ Correspondingly, Book XI of the *Odyssey* has raised suspicions of scholars for a long time and, together with the recourse to Kirke, is often supposed to be a later addition to the epic. Importantly, Odysseus' visit to the underworld "disrupts the Circe episode," as the hero leaves the goddess and then returns to her again, somewhat against the logic of the genre; moreover, "[t]he Circe episode itself is a doublet of sorts to that of Calypso."²⁸ Abusch's arguments are succinct, but persuasive, and may be summarized thus: 1. Tablet VI of the Gilgamesh epic is structurally linked to Tablet XII, and both are later additions; 2. these changes to the Near Eastern poem influenced a parallel rendering of the *Odyssey*, since Tablet VI finds reflection in the Kirke episode, as does Tablet XII in Book XI; 3. just as the Gilgamesh epic had at first ended with Shiduri and the hero's return to Uruk, so did the *Odyssey* with Kalypso and Odysseus' return to Ithaca, but the aforementioned insertions created the need for the Uta-napishti and Phaiakia episodes, respectively.

It is worth pointing out, too, that if this reconstruction is correct, then it is Ishtar, rather than Shiduri, that emerges as mould for Kirke. On the other hand, Ishtar shares a certain characteristic with Calypso, too, namely the desire for the mortal heroes, who ultimately reject them (Odysseus never ceases in his longing for home and Penelope). Still, as has already been indicated above, the influence of the Shiduri figure should not by that be diminished. The interweaving of the traits, attributes and functions in the characters of Uta-napishti, Alkinoös and Teiresias seems similarly intricate and not obviously linear, and from the Hellenic point of view also highly adaptive. What emerges, therefore, is that through comparisons of this sort we may glimpse how complex and multifaceted the transition of the Near Eastern models into their Greek counterparts was.

²⁷ This fragment is indeed excluded by George from his rendition of the Standard Version, and appended instead as an original Sumerian poem (*Bilgames and the Netherworld: 'In those days, in those far-off days'* XII lff).

²⁸ T. Abusch: "The Epic of Gilgamesh..." pp. 3–6. For the problems of the *Odyssey*'s Book XI, see: D. Page: *The Homeric Odyssey*. Oxford 1955, pp. 21–51.

The *Iliad* offers one particularly significant example of a similar pair in relation to the Epic of Gilgamesh. Thetis and Ninsun, Gilgamesh's mother, occupy very special positions within the poems: their divine origin affords their children the 'extra-heroic' status of demigods, and both men – their temperaments, privileges and destinies – are unimaginable without their mothers. Both goddesses possess prior knowledge about the futures of their sons. Ninsun tells Gilgamesh about the imminent coming of Enkidu (I 268–272: “a mighty comrade will come to you . . . [l]ike a wife you'll love him, caress and embrace him, he will be mighty, and often will save you”; cf. I 288–293), while Thetis is fully aware of Achilles' doom: μήτηρ . . . μέ φησι θεὰ Θέτις ἄργυρόπεζα διχθαδίας κῆρας φερέμεν θανατοιο τέλος (IX 410–411: “my mother Thetis, the silver-footed goddess, tells me of the twofold fates that carry me toward death's end”); ὠκύμορος δὴ μοι τέκος ἔσσεαι . . . αὐτίκα γάρ τοι ἔπειτα μεθ' Ἑκτορα πότμος ἐτοῖμος (XVIII 95–96: “you shall indeed die soon, my child . . . for Hektor's death your own is sure to closely follow”). Also, although on occasions both heroes interact directly with other gods themselves, their mothers plead on their behalf if the divinity is too far removed and unavailable for an audience with a mortal. Thetis carries Achilles' entreaty to Zeus, when the hero withdraws from battle and wishes for the Achaean failure in his absence. Ninsun supplicates Shamash for the successful completion of Gilgamesh's quest against Humbaba, the giant guardian of the Cedar Forest. Finally, even though Thetis is more present in the story of Achilles than Ninsun in that of Gilgamesh, the two goddesses are far more important in the epics, and also in the lives of the heroes, than the shadowy mortal fathers. The similarity between the two figures is, therefore, underlined by a number of key themes: in the first place, the significance of maternal ancestry; the divinity of the mothers and its consequences for the sons; and the particularly close, intimate relationships which enable the heroes to seek their mothers' counsel, comfort and support, unmatched by any other figures in the epics.²⁹

“Like a lioness without her cubs”: Vocabulary and Scenes

Finally, there are certain fragments of the three epics, whose correspondences cannot be dismissed as coincidental; in these cases, a precise and direct influence of the Epic of Gilgamesh on Homer should be assumed. Since, as mentioned in the introduction, any meaningful historical reconstruction is here impossible, what follows is simply a short list of four strikingly similar scenes. This list,

²⁹ For more detailed commentary on the Ninsun-Thetis parallel, see: J.M. Sasson: “Some Literary Motifs...,” p. 279; M.L. West: *The East Face of Helicon...*, p. 336; B. Louden: “The Gods in the Epic...,” pp. 96–97; H.P. Foley: “Women in Ancient Epic...,” pp. 102–109.

it should also be noted, contains elements most often cited by the scholars who had written on the subject previously, and draws from most of the works quoted in this paper.

1. The close correspondence between the openings of the *Odyssey* and the Gilgamesh epic is often pointed out. In both instances, the poets begin by listing the adventures and achievements of the heroes, before revealing their identity. Significantly, the focus in both texts is on the intellectual dimension of the journeys and their immaterial gains. While it would be pointless to reproduce here the entire fragments, a sample is in place:

“He who saw the Deep, the country’s foundation,
[who] knew . . . , was wise in all matters! . . .
[He] . . . everywhere . . .
and [learned] of everything the sum of wisdom.
He saw what was secret, discovered what was hidden,
he brought back a tale of before the Deluge.
He came a far road, was weary, found peace,
and set all his labours on a tablet of stone.”

(*Gil.* I 1–10)

ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, μοῦσα, πολύτροπον, ὃς μάλα πολλὰ
πλάγχθη, ἐπεὶ Τροίης ἱερὸν πτολίεθρον ἔπερσεν:
πολλῶν δ’ ἀνθρώπων ἴδεν ἄστεα καὶ νόον ἔγνω,
πολλὰ δ’ ὃ γ’ ἐν πόντῳ πάθεν ἄλγεα ὃν κατὰ θυμόν,
ἀρνύμενος ἥν τε ψυχὴν καὶ νόστον ἐταίρων.
(*Od.* 1–6: “Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story
of that man skilled in all ways of contending,
the wanderer, harrier for years on end,
after he plundered the stronghold
on the proud height of Troy.
He saw the townlands
and learned the minds of many distant men,
and weathered many bitter nights and days
in his deep heart at sea, while he fought only
to save his life, to bring his shipmates home.”)³⁰

2. When Penelope learns of Telemachos’ departure, she performs a curious ritual, otherwise unheard of in Greece – as it is, her acts copy exactly the sacrifice made by Ninsun upon hearing of Gilgamesh’s plans to travel to the Cedar Forest and slay Humbaba. This episode is truly outstanding, as the Greek rendering of the

³⁰ The translations of the Homeric chapters provided in this sub-chapter are from: R. Fitzgerald: *Homer. The Odyssey*. London 2007, and R. Fitzgerald: *Homer. The Iliad*. Oxford 2008.

passage offers a rare insight into the process of editing an epic poem: the poet replaced exotic incense of the Near Eastern original with much more familiar barley (οὐλοχύται).³¹

“Into the bath-house she went seven times,
[she bathed] herself in water of tamarisk and soapwort.
[She donned] a fine dress to adorn her body,
[she chose a jewel] to adorn her breast.
Having put on [her cap], she donned her tiara,
. the harlots . . . the ground.
She climbed the staircase and went up on the roof,
on the roof she set up a censer to Shamash.
Scattering incense she lifted her arms in appeal to the Sun God . . .”
(*Gil.* III 37–45)

ἡ δ' ὕδρην αμένη, καθαρὰ χροῖ εἵμαθ' ἐλοῦσα
εἰς ὑπερῶ' ἀνέβαινε σὺν ἀμφιπόλοισι γυναιξίν,
ἐν δ' ἔθετ' οὐλοχύτας κανέω, ἡράτο δ' Ἀθήνη . . .
(*Od.* IV 759–761: “The Lady Penélopê arose and bathed,
dressing her body in her freshest linen,
filled a basket with barley, and led her maids
to the upper rooms, where she besought Athena . . .”)

3. The profound effects of grief on Achilles and Gilgamesh notwithstanding, the scenes of the actual lament over the dead comrades are not only matching in meaning and content, but both heroes are also compared to lions mourning and searching for their cubs:

“Like a lioness deprived of her cubs,
he paced to and fro, this way and that.”
(*Gil.* VIII 61–62.)

. . . ὥς τε λῆς ἡγένηιος,
ῥά θ' ὑπὸ σκύμνους ἐλαφιβόλος ἀρπάσῃ ἀνὴρ
ῥῆς ἐκ πυκνῆς: ὁ δέ τ' ἄχνηται ὕστερος ἐλθὼν,
πολλὰ δέ τ' ἄγκε' ἐπῆλθε μετ' ἀνέρος ἔχνη' ἐρευνῶν
εἴ ποθεν ἐξεύροι . . .
(*Il.* XVII 318–322: “[Achilles felt] bereft as a lioness
whose whelps a hunter seized out of a thicket;
late in returning, she will grieve, and roam
through many meandering valleys on his track
in hope of finding him . . .”)

³¹ This little Hellenic touch is observed by W. Burkert in both *The Orientalizing Revolution...*, pp. 99–100, and “Near Eastern Connections...,” p. 300.

4. Injured by Diomedes, Aphrodite flees to Olympus, just as Ishtar returns to heaven when rejected by Gilgamesh; both goddesses then proceed to complain to their parents. The father-gods' responses have the same, semi-scornful and affectionate tone. The parallel runs deeper: the incident in the *Iliad* is the only occasion for Dione's appearance, and it has been suggested that the poet had invented her precisely for this particular scene, by simply feminizing the masculine form of the name Zeus. Ishtar's parents are Anu and Antum, and again it is the same name, in its respective gender forms according to the Akkadian rules of declension. The speculation here must necessarily be cautious, but it is very likely that the Greek poet included this scene in his text, having encountered its Mesopotamian prototype and then expanded on it considerably, for entertainment value. Significantly, the Ishtar episode (itself most probably a late addition: see above) is crucial for the plot of the Gilgamesh epic, while Aphrodite's trouble may be classified as an anecdotal digression:³²

"The goddess Ishtar [heard] these words,
she [went up] to heaven in a furious rage.
[Weeping] she went to Anu, her father,
before Antu, her mother, her tears did flow . . .
Anu opened his mouth to speak,
saying to the Lady Ishtar:
'Ah, but was it not you who provoked King Gilgamesh,
so he told a tale of foulest slander,
slander about you and insults too?'"

(*Gil.* VI 80–91)

. . . ἢ δ' ἄλυουσ' ἀπεβήσεται, τείρετο δ' αἰνῶς
τὴν μὲν ἄρ' Ἴρις ἐλοῦσα ποδὴνεμος ἔξαγ' ὁμίλου
ἄχθομένην ὀδύνῃσι, μελαίνετο δὲ χροῶα καλόν . . .

ἢ δ' ἐν γούνασι πίπτε Διώνης δι' Ἀφροδίτη
μητρὸς ἑῆς . . .
. . . μείδησεν δὲ πατὴρ ἀνδρῶν τε θεῶν τε,
καὶ ῥα καλεσσάμενος προσέφη χρυσὴν Ἀφροδίτην:
'οὐ τοι τέκνον ἐμὸν δέδοται πολέμη' ἔργα,
ἀλλὰ σύ γ' ἱμερόεντα μετέρχεο ἔργα γάμοιο,
ταῦτα δ' Ἀρηϊ θοῶ καὶ Ἀθήνῃ πάντα μελήσει.
(*Il.* V 353–430: "So taunted, faint with pain, she quit the field,
being by wind-running Iris helped away
in anguish, sobbing, while her lovely skin
ran darkness . . .

³² It is Burkert, again, who makes the tantalizing proposition: *The Orientalizing Revolution...*, pp. 96–99; "Near Eastern Connections..." pp. 297–298. Cf. L.H. Feldman: "Homer and the Near East..." p. 19.

In Dione's lap Aphrodite sank down . . .
 He smiled at this, the father of gods and men,
 and said to the pale-gold goddess Aphrodite:
 'Warfare is not for you, child. Lend yourself
 to sighs of longing and the marriage bed.
 Let Ares and Athena deal with war.'")

A Few Conclusions

There should be little doubt that the authors of the two great Homeric poems were at least cursorily familiar with the Near Eastern literature, and the Epic of Gilgamesh in particular; whether those were the early Archaic *aoidoi*, their predecessors or those who finally set the texts in writing, is at this point impossible to know. It is nevertheless clear that the influence of the Gilgamesh story is to be detected on multiple layers of the Greek epics: from the novel ideology of humanism and strictly human interest that in its emphasis on the intimate and the personal broke away from the standards of myth, and made the three main heroes – Achilles, Gilgamesh, Odysseus – into multidimensional, emphatic and relatable characters; to the host of background figures who share in their narrative functions as driving the stories and their protagonists towards their ends and destinies, and moreover offer in their very portrayals additional comment on the world of the epic. On the other hand, the scenes which seem to be unmistakably copied from the Mesopotamian originals and then adapted into their Greek forms, may suggest that the acquaintance of the Hellenic poets with the Near Eastern literature was more than pedestrian; if this is true, the Greek fascination with the story of the King of Uruk is evident.

That in the case of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* one might speak of adaptation of the Near Eastern models, rather than less intricate reproduction or indeed direct translation, falls neatly in with the observations and arguments put forward by many Hellenists examining the cultural exchange with the East. Just like their fellow artists and craftsmen of the 7th and 6th centuries BC, the Greek men of letters (so to speak) were in their work highly selective and even more creative; the transposition of the Eastern tales onto the Greek soil was, therefore, an achievement of appropriation, and the inspiration engendered ingenuity more than anything else.

To an extent this is true; but the fundamental fact of such inspiration, and the chosen direction whence it was sought, cannot be overlooked in favour of any simple affirmation of the Greek genius.³³

³³ Such praise for the Greek talent, mainly in the context of art, was propagated most notably by J. Boardman, who went as far as to argue that the period of increased borrowings from the East was for the Greeks a negative experience, as it delayed the arrival of the "Classical perfection" (*The Greeks Overseas...*, pp. 54–55, 141–143; see also: *Pre-Classical. From Crete to Archaic Greece*. London 1967, pp. 107–108). Cf. O. Murray: *Early Greece*. London 1993, p. 82; W. Burkert:

Rather, the acknowledgement of this genius should rest with the special place the Greek peoples had occupied in antiquity: entering history as Indo-Europeans with their own traditions and oral literature, upon their arrival on the shores of the southern Mediterranean they had settled within the far-reaching scope of various Near Eastern influences of which they were mostly receptive, positively (the ‘Orientalizing Revolution’) or negatively (The Persian Wars and their protracted aftermath that continued to Alexander and beyond); it is within this multicultural context that the triumph of Greek identity and originality should be placed.³⁴ These idiosyncratic qualities found one form of expression in the Homeric epics which, drawing from the Indo-European and Hellenic folklore and mythology, were nonetheless transformed – or perhaps even perfected – when reflected against the ancient and rich Near Eastern literature that proved inspiring and worthy of the Greek artistic attention. Achilles especially, but Odysseus also, take their exceptional places within the Greek tradition as heirs to Gilgamesh; through them, Gilgamesh steps in from the mist of time and history as an ancestor to the West. In this light, the attempts to remove early Greece from the single-track model of the descent of Western culture and to reclaim it as the easternmost frontier of the ancient ‘Orient’ – Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, even the Levant – seem wholly appropriate; the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* stand out not only as the masterpieces of the European civilization, but also as singularly Hellenic parts of the Near Eastern literature, to which they are ever indebted.

The Orientalizing Revolution..., p. 7: “the ‘creative transformation’ by the Greeks . . . should not obscure the sheer fact of borrowing; this would amount to yet another strategy of immunization designed to cloud what is foreign and disquieting.”

³⁴ See especially: W. Burkert: *The Orientalizing Revolution...*, pp. 1–8, 128–129; and S.P. Morris (*Daidalos...*, pp. 73–100). It is also worth to recommend here the first volume of Bernal’s *Black Athena*, portentously entitled “The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785–1985” where the author expounds at length on the legacies of the 19th-century European classical scholarship, which all too often tended towards the romanticized nationalistic and anti-Semitic movements and schools of thought. Despite the faults of his argument elsewhere, in this discussion Bernal is instructive and persuasive, especially if read, for a more general reference, with Edward Said’s *Orientalism*.